



THE ROLE OF CULTURAL SCHEMATA IN CRITICAL READING

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ABSTRACT

Reading is considered as a highly complex process which involves an active interaction between the reader and the text within a larger socio-cultural context. Critical reading is related to the thinking process of the readers and requires a deeper engagement with the text. It goes beyond mere understanding of the words printed on a page and thus, indulges in the process of analysing, interpreting and sometimes even evaluating the text. Cultural schemata can be perceived as the existing background knowledge of the individual which is formed out of the socio-cultural milieu he is an integral part of. In course of the interpretation and evaluation of the text the reader brings in the organized knowledge he already has in his mind. This paper makes an attempt to find out various aspects of the process of reading a text critically and also how our cultural schemata can influence this complex phenomenon.

KEYWORDS: Critical reading, thinking, cultural schemata.

INTRODUCTION:

Reading as a skill in second language learning has always been on top in terms of importance and has drawn a considerable amount of attention from language experts across the world over the years. Naturally, it has a long history attached to it. The changes it went through in terms of its definition and nature in course of its long journey are also significant. The necessity to develop reading skill in second language has always remained one of the most important goals for the learners and the probable reason for making it a priority is that it provides a basis for the learner to access the second language in the best possible ways.

Reading:

The complexities involved in this process have prompted language experts and practitioners to come out with various definitions of reading and as a result, it is impossible to find a single definition of the term. The following definitions might be able to present some crucial aspects of reading which would be helpful in understanding the term itself.

According to Grabe and Stoller, reading is "...the ability to draw meaning from the printed page and interpret this information appropriately". (as cited in Davoudi and Ramezani, 2014). But this 'appropriate' interpretation of the received information is largely dependent on the ability of the reader and also his knowledge. This definition also suggests the idea that reading is an interactive process of meaning making because of the interaction of the text and the reader. Widdowson is of the view that reading is a reasoning activity where the meaning is created on the basis of textual clues which, in a way, is suggestive of the interaction that happens between the reader and the text. (as cited in Davoudi and Ramezani, 2014). As per this view, reading is not a mechanical process and requires much effort on the part of the reader to decode and comprehend the written message. Anderson refers to it as "an active, fluent process which involves the reader, the reading material in building meaning. Meaning does not reside on the printed page...Synergy occurs in reading, which combines the words on the printed page with the readers background knowledge and experiences." (as cited in Erten and Razi, 2009).

The above definitions of reading take a lot of factors into account: the text or the reading material, the reader, the thinking process that causes the interaction between them and also the knowledge that already exists in the reader. So, reading is no more considered the ability to read out the information on a printed page; neither, it is solely the knowledge of the reader that decides the fate of reading. It is a combined effort of the reader, the text, the knowledge of the reader, the thinking process, the interaction of reader's knowledge and the text, the socio-cultural context of the reader. It is interesting to note in this context how reading and the perceptions towards reading have changed over the years. The traditional pedagogy centred on reading and writing activities in a second or foreign language. The surrounding environment supported the learner to sharpen reading and writing skills since there was hardly any opportunity for developing listening and speaking skills. The ability to read in another language was the main focus. As a result, there came up the Grammar-Translation method and rote learning was the only way out. It was adapted in accordance with the behaviourist theory of learning.

Theories of Learning:

Behaviourist theory of learning entails accumulation of knowledge by achieving a number of objectives in the process of learning. The learning outcome is judged on the basis of change in observable behaviour determined by stimulus and response association. The knowledge items are sequenced in a hierarchical order and the process begins with simple items and gradually moves to more complex structures. However, this theory did not give any importance to the thinking process of the learners. As a result, this theory was challenged and cognitive theories of learning were introduced. This theory recognized learning as an active process of knowledge construction within one's mind. The new information from outside interacts with the existing knowledge and information in the mind and knowledge is reconstructed. Thus, the process of constructing knowledge continues in an individual and new ideas are accommodated or adjusted in the conceptual map. This theory of learning, thus, closely connects learning, thinking, meaning-making and formation of new knowledge and takes our understanding of learning a step further by going beyond the mere accumulation of new information. The knowledge and experience of the individual learner are, thus, valued in the process of language learning (Scarino and Liddicoat, 2009). The cognitive theories of learning is clearly indicative of the fact that reading is not a merely a process of retrieving a handful of information from a text and answering a few questions based on the selected text. It goes beyond mere literal understanding of the printed words; it actively involves the reading into thinking about the given information and interacts with the already existing information and creates an understanding of the text.

Critical Reading:

Critical reading is related to the thinking process of an individual and that is why it is impossible to read without thinking. So, it can be suggested in another way that critical reading automatically draws critical insight from the reader. Critical reading is a more active way of reading which demands a deeper and more complex engagement with the text. (Duncan). While reading a text critically the reader applies his thinking skill to question both the text and his own way of understanding the text. Critical reading involves the reader to analyse the written text, interpret it in his own way and finally can also evaluate the given information by verifying with his own existing knowledge. Without prior knowledge it is impossible for the reader to make any sense of a text. His background knowledge plays a key role to make critical reading a success.

Schema Theory and Cultural Schema:

In cognitive science, schema theory is defined as a theory on how knowledge is acquired, processed and retrieved (Al-Issa, 2015). It is a technical term used by the cognitive scientists to describe how people process, organise and store information in their head. Schemas reflect "the experiences, conceptual understanding, attitudes, values, skills, and strategies...[we] bring to a text situation" (Vacca and Vacca, 1999 as cited in Al-Issa, 2015). The same has been defined by Smith (1994) in a more elaborate manner: "Everything we know and believe is organized in a theory of what the world is like, a theory that is the basis of all our perceptions and understanding of the world, the root of all learning, the source of hopes and fears, motive and expectancies, reasoning and creativity. And this theory is all we have. If we make sense of the world at all, it is by interpreting our interactions with the world in the light of our theory. The theory is our shield against bewilderment." (as cited in Al-Issa, 2015).

Among the various types of schema that are frequently discussed 'formal' schema and 'content' schema are the important ones. Formal schema is defined as the knowledge of linguistic aspects of a text, how a text is organized and what type of writing convention has been followed in order to build the text. According to Carrell (1987), the familiarity with the rhetorical organization makes it easier for the readers to read and understand a text whereas the unfamiliarity with it causes hindrances in reading a text. (as cited in Erten and Razi, 2009). The content schema can be described as the knowledge of content and further, this content can be of two types- the background knowledge and the knowledge of the topic or subject matter. In Alderson's (2000) view, in the first type, the knowledge may or may not be relevant to a particular text whereas in the second type, the knowledge is directly related to the topic or the text. (as cited in Erten and Razi, 2009).

But the one which is related to the present topic of discussion is called the cultural schema. (Yule, 1996 as cited in Erten and Razi, 2009). This can be seen as an extension of content schema and this schema gets developed because the reader is an integral part of a society and it has its unique culture. The cultural content forms the schema in an individual because he is born into a particular culture without a choice and grows up as a member of it and thus familiarizes himself with the ways of that culture. The inevitability of the cultural content into his mind forms his ways of thinking, perceptions, attitudes and other various observable and hidden components of his personality.

Socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky would support this idea of knowledge formation. This theory advocates the interdependency of the individual and the society in the construction of knowledge. It is based on the idea that human activities take place in a cultural context and are mediated by language and other symbol systems (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996). This theory thus connects the individual thinking and the cultural context. This theory holds the idea that the activities that happen in our mind are the results of our interaction within the mind and also our interaction with the other members of our society. So, our thinking and perceptions are thus influenced by our culture. It is important to remember in this context that this interaction happens at two levels- firstly, the interaction within the individual's mind called the intrapersonal interaction and secondly, the interaction between the individual and the society or other members of the society called the interpersonal interaction.

Cultural Schema and Critical Reading:

There have been several studies done on the effects of cultural familiarity on the reading comprehension (Alptekin, 2006 and Alderson, 1979) and all of them suggested positive results. The familiarity of the cultural content or text containing cultural materials seemed to bring out better results among the students in terms of comprehending and evaluating a text. Alptekin (2006) suggests the role of cultural knowledge "needs to be investigated not necessarily in the framework of two texts that are thought to be syntactically, lexically, and rhetorically equivalent, but in the context of the same text used in two different ways, one being the original and the other a culturally nativized version." (as cited in Erten and Razi, 2009). He referred to 'nativization' as the pragmatic and semantic adaptation of the textual and contextual clues of the original story into the learner's own culture, while keeping its linguistic and rhetorical content essentially intact." (as cited in Erten and Razi, 2009). In this connection, it is also important to mention two approaches to reading- top-down approach and bottom-up approach. Bottom up approach allows the reader to read a text starting from the basic components of a written text from letters to words and thus gradually move on to the discourse whereas the top-down approach allows the reader to have an overall view on the subject matter and this is done basically on the basis of the knowledge that already exists in the reader. So, it is almost impossible to understand fully the content of a text unless one has some sort of background knowledge which automatically comes within an individual because he is an integral part of a cultural group. Reading a text critically involves interaction with the text in various ways – to find out the most important points and examples, to point out various aspects of a particular argument, to predict and make necessary corrections in course of reading the text, to reflect on one's own reading and thinking, to compare with the existing ideas and judge the validity of the author's argument. The reader must be careful not to be prejudiced on a particular issue if it goes against his own cultural understanding. He must be able to put himself in a position where he would read a text critically with the help of his cultural knowledge but not become prejudiced by it.

CONCLUSION:

Critical reading requires much effort on the part of the reader since it engages the reader's mind in various ways as the above discussion shows. Also, the reader being a part of a particular cultural group has specific ways of reading, interpreting and evaluating a text. This cultural influence is inevitable and also makes a great deal of impact on the reader's perceptions. So, the reader must be careful in making use of this cultural knowledge when reading a text critically.

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